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Ways to Save Money in Your Business

Save your company thousands of dollars with these penny-pinching tips.

Entrepreneur[®].com

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101 Ways to Save Money in Your Business

On a shoestring budget (and what entrepreneur isn't?), it really pays to scrimp and save. Just in case you've forgotten the value of a hard-earned penny, we've come up with a slew of money-saving ideas to boost your business's bottom line—from finding ways to cut your legal or electric bills to auditing your commercial lease and even unplugging your coffee maker. Though some tips will save you more money than others, the end result of your overall spendthrift strategy could add up to a bundle.

PENNY-PINCHING PROMOTIONS

1. Piggyback your advertising. Including advertising material in other mailings, such as in invoices, saves postage and other costs, says J. Donald Weinrauch, co-author of *The Frugal Marketer*. Likewise, make the most of your point-of-purchase opportunities by tucking coupons, newsletters or other promotional fliers in the bag with customers' purchases.

2. Wait 'til the last minute. To keep print advertising costs down, consider "remnant" advertising. Many magazine publishers offer last-minute, unsold, discounted ad space.

3. Be a good neighbor. Split advertising and promotion costs with neighboring businesses. Jointly promote a sidewalk sale, or take your marketing alliance further by sharing mailing lists, distribution channels and suppliers with businesses that sell complementary goods or services.

4. Ask the people you know for help. The kind of support you'd most like to get from your contacts is referrals—the names of specific individuals who need your products and services. So go ahead and ask! Your contacts can also give prospects your name and number. As the number of referrals you receive increases, so does your potential for increasing the percentage of your business generated through referrals.

5. Got a happy customer? By telling others what they've gained from using your products or services in presentations or informal conversations, your sources can encourage others to use your products or services.

6. Make a special TV appearance. Local cable TV stations often have very reasonable advertising rates at time slots throughout the day and night. Though you won't necessarily reach prime-time viewers, you will make an impression where it counts—in the comfort of potential customers' homes.

Read more online: www.entrepreneur.com/article/0,4621,304954,00.html

7. Be open to suggestions. For free market research, just ask your customers. Set up a suggestion box at your place of business (or online), suggests Weinrauch. Ask customers to fill out their names, addresses and e-mail addresses along with their suggestions, and you've got the makings of a mailing list, too. While you're at it, ask your employees for cost-saving suggestions, too.

Read more online: www.entrepreneur.com/article/0,4621,309991,00.html

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8. Follow the gurus. Jay Conrad Levinson is one of many marketing gurus to offer free marketing advice on the Web. Check out his free advice on his site, www.gmarketing.com. You can also find marketing and homebased business advice on our own Marketing Coach Kim T. Gordon's Web site, www.smallbusinessnow.com.

Read more online: www.entrepreneur.com/experts

PHONE FACTS

9. Offer expert advice. Teaching a class, speaking at a community meeting, or writing an article for a local paper not only makes you look like an expert but garners low-cost attention for your business.

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10. Tune in to the Bells. Shop around for the best long-distance deal. To learn more about saving money on long distance, visit the nonprofit Telecommunications Research & Action Center Web site at <http://trac.org> or search online for long-distance service comparison sites.

11. Dial toll-free. Before calling a vendor, supplier or even a customer, check the toll-free directory at (800) 555-1212 to see if they have a toll-free number. Or check out AT&T's toll-free number directory online at www.tollfree.att.net/tf.html.

12. Tune in to your cell-phone bill. Take a long, hard look at your monthly charges each month. "You'd be surprised at the number of errors," says Greg Gimba, managing partner for Anet Consulting Group Inc., a global strategic marketing firm in Daytona Beach, Florida. "Often, you're charged for calls that didn't go through."

INTERNET IDEAS

13. Start your search engines. Research your market and find potential visitors for your Web site by looking through Usenet newsgroups (forums on the Internet where people post messages for public viewing) and special-interest groups related to your target market, product or service. Or, if you have America Online, visit their Small Business Center, which includes libraries of small-business information you can download at no charge. For more extensive online information, use Yahoo's Business Resources (www.yahoo.com).

14. Advertise on the Net. Check out the Internet Advertising Resource Guide (www.voyager.net/adv/internet-advertising-guide.html), a Web site that includes information on everything from online advertising to how to get to other useful sites.

15. Cut costs when setting up your online store. Think going online has to cost an arm and a leg? You can start out by selling items for next to nothing on online auction sites like eBay and Yahoo! Auctions. If you want to create a professional storefront, there are several "Web site in a box" solutions available, usually for a low monthly fee.

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16. Advertise on someone else's site. Many Web site owners will provide a link on their page to your Web site for a fee. For information, visit the IPA Online Advertising Index at www.netcreations.com/ipa/adindex/.

17. Start chatting. Find newsgroups that cater to your audience, and join the fray. "I didn't start [participating in online discussion groups] to generate business, but as a way to find information for myself on various subjects," says Shel Horowitz, owner of Northampton, Massachusetts-based Accurate Writing & More and author of several marketing books, including Grassroots Marketing. "But it turned out to be the single best marketing tool I use. It costs only my time. [One] list alone has gotten me around 60 clients in the past five years." Always include your URL in your signature, but don't do any hard selling—most groups will ban you immediately. Instead, provide useful information that'll make people want to click on your site.

18. Spread the word yourself. Are you letting people know what your URL is? Try putting it on your letterhead and business cards and in e-mail signatures—wherever potential visitors are likely to see it. Include it on employee uniforms, any promotional items you give away, all press releases, in your Yellow Pages ad and on company vehicles.

LOCATION LOGIC

19. Look over your lease. "Lots of people don't realize they're being overcharged on their commercial leases," says Gimba. He recommends auditing your lease agreement regularly with the help of an attorney familiar with your type of lease. Pay special attention to the stated square footage and "shared costs" you pay for maintenance of common areas (which you should ensure are actually being maintained).

Read more online: www.entrepreneur.com/article/0,4621,289729,00.html

20. Get a suite deal. You don't have to run your office full-time from an executive suite to benefit from its services. Many homebased entrepreneurs find executive suites meet a range of needs, including access to a private mailbox and a receptionist to answer or forward calls to your home office. Visit the Office Business Center Association International at www.officebusinesscenters.com for more information.

21. Be mobile. While the costs of establishing a permanent retail location can be steep—you may spend up to \$100,000 or more, with leases spanning three to 10 years—carts, kiosks and temporary spaces can be an easier way to get a foot in the door with a lot less risk. The upfront investment for a kiosk or a cart ranges from just \$2,000 to \$10,000, according to Patricia Norins, publisher of *Specialty Retail Report*. License agreements for carts and kiosks are shorter and are usually renewed every month up to one year depending on the location. This arrangement makes it easy for entrepreneurs to "come in, try it out for a month, and if their product isn't working, shift to a new product line or close up shop and move to a new location," Norins says.

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ENERGY EFFICIENCY

22. Put things in a better light. Using fluorescent rather than incandescent light bulbs conserves energy and lowers your electric bill.

23. Use your entrepreneurial clout. "Utility [companies] have a stake in the economic development of a community and often offer special rates to entrepreneurs," says Pete Collins of New York City-based Coopers & Lybrand LLP.

24. Unplug your equipment. Save electricity by turning off the coffee maker in your break room, suggests David L. Scott, author of *The Guide to Saving Money*. Pour the fresh coffee into a large thermos instead. Have employees turn their computers off at night and install motion sensors so that unoccupied rooms aren't sucking up your electricity at all times of the day.

25. Buy and use energy-efficient products. Look for the Energy Star (www.energystar.gov) label; it was created by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Energy to help reduce unnecessary energy use and air pollution by labeling energy-efficient, cost-saving products for homes and offices.

26. Request an energy audit and off-peak usage discount from your utility company. The energy audit is free, and they'll give you plenty of tips to conserve energy and reduce your power bill. For the discount, get a printout of your energy consumption. "Ask for a discount when your peak usage coincides with their low-point usage," advises Lyn Richards, owner of Dog Logic, a resource center for large- and giant-breed dog owners and breeders in Manchester, New Hampshire. "Many power companies will give a 2½-cent-per-kilowatt-hour discount when you do this."

OFFICE OVERHEAD

27. Buy recycled printer cartridges. Check Google or your Yellow Pages for a local recycled printer cartridge supplier. Or if you want to mix your charitable instincts with your printing needs, visit www.lasermonks.com, a remanufactured printing supply company run by a group of monks in Wisconsin who, after business expenses are paid, donate their profits.

28. Draft a savings plan. Make your laser printer cartridges last longer by using draft mode to print interoffice memos and other less important documents.

29. Cut down on copies. Monitoring your use of copiers saves on supplies and maintenance.

30. Fill it out for free. Instead of buying forms at your local office supply store or spending time creating them yourself, you can find tons of free forms online that you can download, customize and print. Entrepreneur.com's Formnet (www.entrepreneur.com/formnet) can get you started.

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31. Don't give 'em so much garbage. Many businesses overpay to have their garbage picked up daily, says Gimba. "Half the time, your containers aren't even full," he says. "Reduce costs by reducing your service to every other day." You can also reduce the amount of office garbage you generate by recycling your white paper—first by using the blank backs as scratch pads and then by taking it to a recycling facility where they'll pay you to take it off your hands.

32. Get free software. Visit www.download.com to try hundreds of software products for free through trial downloads, freeware and limited versions of the full product. Visit Entrepreneur.com's Complete Guide to Software (www.entrepreneur.com/software) to find the best software options for small businesses, including many links to the free trials of those brands. Another tip: If you haven't found what you're looking for through Download.com or our software guide, check out the manufacturer's site. Most offer free trial downloads.

33. Buy computers by mail. You'll pay for shipping, but the savings of not having to pay state sales tax (if you're not buying from a site with offices in your state) often makes up for it.

34. Buy used equipment. Save up to 60 percent by buying used computer equipment, copiers and office furniture from stores such as the nationwide Aaron Rents & Sells chain. Auctions and newspaper classifieds are other good sources of used equipment.

Read more online: www.entrepreneur.com/article/0,4621,307368,00.html

35. Send just the fax. Rather than waste paper, transmission time and effort on a fax cover page, use a Post-it note or simply write at the top of the first page you're sending.

AUTO ADVICE

36. Consider leasing. If you put lots of mileage on your business vehicle and expect to drive it for less than five years, try leasing. (Beware, however, of mileage limits and nonrefundable deposits, which may make leasing less attractive.) Leasing frees up capital and enables you to drive a luxury car for less.

Read more online: www.entrepreneur.com/vehicleguide/0,6249,,00.html

37. Put your best fleet forward. Ask your dealer if you qualify for a cost-saving fleet incentive program. Though such programs are typically geared toward fleets of 10 or more cars, some dealers will work with small-business owners.

38. Stay away from the pump. Fueling business cars gets expensive fast, especially if your company makes deliveries or your salespeople spend a lot of time on the road. A few simple steps can help slash your gas expenses. Start by checking the owner's manual for the octane rating your vehicle needs. Most can fill up with the less expensive 87 octane. Next, assess driving habits, which have a big-time impact on your gas bill. Are your drivers first off the line when the light turns green? That burns big gulps of gas. Is your impatient right foot constantly mashing, then releasing, the throttle? Maintaining a steady pace is more fuel-efficient. Must people really drive 75 miles per hour? Cutting back to 55 mph translates into 25 percent more mileage.

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Poor vehicle maintenance decreases fuel efficiency, too. Clogged air filters or wheels that need alignment can drain dollars at the pump. Tires are prime gas-guzzling suspects, too. The correct tire pressure can give you as many as 20 more miles from each tank. Learn to use a tire pressure gauge.

INSURANCE INTELLIGENCE

39. Save by association. When looking for insurance, check with your trade association. Many associations offer competitive group insurance.

Read more online: <http://www.entrepreneur.com/insurancecenter>

40. Shop around. At the end of each insurance policy period, review your business's needs and get several bids before renewing your policy. Ask your agent to review your coverage, do a risk assessment and make suggestions on how you might be able to save money. Insurance companies are always introducing new products, and what was the best deal for you last year may be topped by something else this year.

41. Be prepared. Buying appropriate insurance upfront saves money in the long run, says Jeanne Salvatore of the Insurance Information Institute (www.iii.org), a nonprofit organization in New York City. Consider what situations would be catastrophic to your business and protect yourself with adequate insurance. "Disaster recovery," says Salvatore, "is one area where business owners shouldn't scrimp."

Read more online: www.entrepreneur.com/article/0,4621,307161,00.html

42. Make a foul-weather friend. By arranging for an alternative place to run your business in case of a major disaster, you may be able to save on business interruption insurance, advises the Insurance Information Institute. For instance, you could arrange with a firm in the same industry to use their facilities in case of damage, and vice versa.

43. Check up on your medical insurance. Before choosing a medical insurance carrier, ask for information on past claims and the loss ratio of paid claims to premiums, advises the Council of Better Business Bureaus (www.bbb.org) in Arlington, Virginia.

44. Raise your deductible. Raising the deductible on your insurance usually lowers your premiums. Even if you end up having to pay the deductible, it's likely to be less than the amount you save.

45. Make an adjustment. It often pays to adjust your health insurance stop-loss amount so that you pay a higher percentage, capped at a lower amount. Though in a worst-case scenario you could end up with more out-of-pocket expenses, your premiums will be lower.

46. Review your rates. "Business owners are often classified for workers' compensation insurance under the wrong rate by their insurance company," says Gimba. "As a result, you may not be getting the proper discount."

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47. Don't leave well enough alone. Sponsoring a wellness and/or disease management program for your employees can cut your health-claim and insurance costs. Promote a bike-to-work week or publish an employee newsletter of health tips, for example.

Read more online: www.entrepreneur.com/article/0,4621,305457,00.html

EMPLOYEE ECONOMICS

48. Offer perks. Often, it's the little things that make employees happy—and they don't have to cost a bundle. Consider buying movie tickets for local theaters at a bulk discount, getting a corporate rate at your local gym, or offering flextime.

Read more online: www.entrepreneur.com/article/0,4621,308123,00.html

49. Give 'em a day. Offer a high-performing employee a paid day off for a job well-done. It may cost you anywhere from \$50 to \$120, but you'll be rewarded with a happier employee.

50. Aim to lease. Employee leasing—in which you turn over your work force to a professional employer organization that leases your employees back to you—can save you substantial cash on employee benefits, says Bruce Steinberg at the American Staffing Association (ASA). For referral to a leasing company near you, visit the ASA online at www.staffingtoday.net.

51. Go with the flow. Rather than paying for employees who sit idle when business is slow, consider hiring temporary employees to handle surges in business.

52. Provide cross-training. If employees can handle more than one job, you may not need extra temporary help during peak periods, suggests Collins.

53. Make experience count. Get free or low-cost help—and give local college students a chance to learn the ropes—by hiring interns.

Read more online: www.entrepreneur.com/article/0,4621,317581,00.html

54. Use independent contractors. Employers generally don't have to withhold or pay any taxes on payments to independent contractors. But be very careful that your independent contractors fit the definition provided by the IRS or you could face penalties.

Read more online: www.entrepreneur.com/article/0,4621,308714,00.html

55. Commission your sales force. Overhead, salaries, incentives, training costs, fringe benefits and expenses add up when you're hiring your own sales representatives. Contracting independent manufacturers' sales reps, paid on commission only, is less expensive—and often equally effective.

Read more online: www.entrepreneur.com/channel/archive/0,7004,483,00.html

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TRAVEL TIPS

56. Don't touch that dial. Never use hotel or pay phones for long-distance calls before inquiring about the charges, says Scott. If charges are too high, purchase a calling card or your own cell phone (but check those roaming charges first).

57. Consider a consolidator. Save a bundle by booking hotel reservations through a reselling consolidator. Altamonte Springs, Florida-based Central Reservations Service, for example, offers a discount of 10 to 40 percent on accommodations at no charge to callers.

58. Keep looking for lower rates. Always ask hotels if they give discounts for business travelers or any groups you may belong to. Once you arrive at your hotel—but before telling the clerk you have a reservation—ask about the lowest available rate. The rate they quote may be even lower than the one you were told over the phone.

59. Cash in on car rental discounts. Sometimes smaller firms offer better deals than national chains. Ask if you qualify for any discounts—for AAA or frequent flier program members, for instance.

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60. Avoid a collision course. Don't pay the high cost of collision and comprehensive insurance through a car rental company if you don't have to. Not only does your personal auto insurance policy probably cover you, says Scott, but many credit cards include car rental insurance if you rent a car using that card.

61. Call on all car rental firms. It's never too late to negotiate for better terms: "Even if you already have a reservation, it pays to do some last-minute shopping at the airport," says Scott. Cancellations and excess inventory may mean one agency can cut you a better deal than another.

62. Fly for free. Build your airline free-travel vouchers by using a credit card that offers frequent flier miles. Be sure, though, you're disciplined enough to pay off your card every month. Visit WebFlyer.com to get more information on frequent flier programs.

Read more online: www.entrepreneur.com/article/0,4621,311873,00.html

63. Don't give up on a discount. If you call an airline and learn all their discount seats are sold out, don't give up. "Airlines limit discounted seats on each flight, often based on the number of seats they expect to sell at full price," says Scott. "If a flight doesn't fill as rapidly as expected, they might open additional discount seats." It could pay to wait for a day or so and try, try again.

64. Dine at a discount . . . discreetly. Use discount dining cards, such as Rewards Network (www.rewardsnetwork.com). You can save 20 percent at restaurants nationwide without showing coupons or cards at the restaurant; instead, you get a monthly refund check in the mail.

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SHIPPING SAVINGS

65. Clean up your mailing list. The U.S. Postal Service will clean up your mailing list for free, correcting addresses, noting incomplete addresses and adding ZIP+4 numbers so you'll be eligible for bar-code discounts.

66. Prune that mailing list even more. The Direct Marketing Association offers this checklist of cost-cutting ideas. Eliminate nonresponders and marginal prospects; print "Address Correction Requested" on the face of your mail; investigate co-mingling your mail with that of other small mailers to take advantage of discounts available mainly to large mailers; and stock-pile mail to build up larger volumes.

67. Be an early bird. Send mail early in the day, and you can usually expect to get one- to two-day delivery for the price of a first-class stamp.

68. Make it a priority. Take advantage of the U.S. Postal Service's Priority Mail \$3.80 flat-rate 2-pound mailers. They often arrive in two days and cost less than competitors' two-day rates.

69. Go for bulk. If you mail in bulk, consider a bulk-mail permit. The permit costs \$150 per year but means lower postage costs per piece.

70. Shop around for an overnight courier. Overnight delivery rates for the major couriers are competitive; however, if you're willing to wait a few hours—or even an extra day—you could save.

Read more: www.entrepreneur.com/article/0,4621,311235,00.html

TAX TACTICS

71. Waste not. Don't throw away your old computers and office equipment. Donate them to a nonprofit organization or school and get a tax write-off.

72. Give what it takes. Business owners can take a 100 percent write-off on each business gift that's no more than \$25. Compare that to the 50 percent write-off for business meals and entertainment, and gift-giving has never looked better. Itemize any gifts—including the name of the recipient and the general nature of your business with that person—and remember that husband and wife are treated as one recipient, advises Crouch.

73. Mind some petty pointers. Don't get careless about your petty cash account. "Though you don't need receipts for expenses under \$75, you should still track these expenses since they can add up," advises Crouch.

74. Hire your children. If your children are at least 14 years old and pay their own taxes, it pays to take advantage of their lower tax bracket. "You can essentially transfer income from your business to them [to save money]," says Scott.

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75. Take a stand on taxes. If your business is new in the neighborhood, you may be at a higher tax rate than those who have been there longer. "Go to city hall to determine what your neighbors are paying, and use this to negotiate a better rate," says Collins. "Expanding businesses can often negotiate with community authorities, who want them to stay in town rather than move and take jobs elsewhere."

76. Homebased? Don't overlook crucial tax deductions. In addition to being able to deduct a portion of your rent or mortgage interest and utilities as a business expense, you can also deduct a percentage of various home maintenance expenses, along with a portion of the cost of services such as house cleaning and lawn care. Check out the IRS's Web site at www.irs.gov, or check with a knowledgeable tax advisor for more information.

Read more online: www.entrepreneur.com/article/0,4621,312028,00.html

77. Get out on the town. If much of your business is conducted at restaurants or you find yourself driving to clients' offices, make sure you take those deductions. If you entertain clients or potential clients to discuss a current or future project, you can deduct a portion of your entertainment costs. To qualify for this deduction, you must maintain a log of entertainment-related expenses you plan to deduct. For mileage, you can deduct 37.5 cents per mile in 2004. This figure usually changes annually, so check with your accountant at the beginning of each year.

FINANCIAL FOCUS

78. Make credit comparisons. If you tend to run unpaid balances on your credit cards at the end of the month, shop for a card with a low interest rate. If you pay in full, it's more important to avoid an annual fee and look for a longer grace period. "Often credit card issuers waive the annual fee or reduce the interest rate if you ask," says Scott. "Just tell your credit card company you've had several solicitations from other companies with more favorable interest rates or no annual fees, and ask if they will reduce yours."

79. Avoid cash advances. "Credit card companies usually charge an upfront fee of up to 2 percent of the advance, with interest accruing immediately," says Scott.

80. Bank on an early deposit. Make bank deposits early enough in the day so you get credit (and start earning interest) that day.

81. Establish a link. By linking your checking account with another account at your bank, you can usually avoid checking charges, says Scott.

82. Get checks in the mail. Ordering your checks from a printing company often costs less than getting them from a bank. Options include Checks in the Mail (www.checksinthemail.com) and Designer Checks (www.designerchecks.com).

83. Form a buying alliance. Join with another business or a trade association for bulk purchasing discounts.

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84. Take it with you. If you're near your suppliers, pick up your order yourself—or perhaps have a friend or family member do it for you, suggests Sarah Williams Steinman, president of Casco Bay Herb Co., an herbal soap manufacturer in Cumberland, Maine. For example, Steinman's husband travels throughout the Northeast. "He keeps me updated as to when he might be near one of my suppliers," she says. "He often travels through the town where my olive oil supplier is, and he'll pick up a few hundred pounds of oil on his way home. That saves me about \$75 in shipping." Caution: Pick up supplies yourself only when it truly saves you money. If it's taking you away from a revenue-producing activity, you're not really saving.

85. Be reluctant to give credit. If you do extend credit, thoroughly check the client's credit background, says Collins. For less-than-creditworthy accounts, Collins advises considering the following actions: Collect cash in advance; send partial shipments; request letters of credit, personal guarantees and a pledge of assets; take out credit insurance; or think about factoring (see below).

Read more online: www.entrepreneur.com/article/0,4621,265488,00.html

86. Consider the factors. Factors—companies that essentially buy and then liquidate a company's accounts receivable—provide an option to tied-up money, says Collins. For more information, visit the International Factoring Association (www.factoring.org).

PROFESSIONAL POLICIES

87. Query your consultants. The professionals you work with regularly are often easy to bargain with, thanks to the rapport you've developed with them. Ask your insurance agent, accountant or attorney how you can cut back on their costs. You'd be surprised at the suggestions they might offer on ways to cut your premiums, reduce billable hours or avoid huge retainers. You might also barter your services.

88. Be a legal eagle. When hiring an attorney, make sure you have a written fee agreement to prevent surprises. It should include an estimate of the time to be spent on your case and specify what's covered in the fee—including typing or copying—and what is not.

89. Learn something new. Rather than pay a consultant to write your press releases, for example, hire one for an hour or so to show you how to do it yourself.

90. Run from the law. "Avoiding lawsuits is a big factor in business success," says Holmes Crouch, author of 18 tax books. "Even arbitration can get expensive." The best alternative: Try to work out any problems before they grow to the point that attorneys get involved. "Don't ignore any written or phone complaints."

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INVESTMENT IQ

91. Get ready to retire. Taking stock of your retirement plan options can significantly reduce your tax bill. Not only are your contributions tax deductible, but the money in your retirement account compounds without taxation until it's withdrawn after retirement. "One of the simplest plans to consider is a Simplified Employee Pension-Individual Retirement Account [SEP-IRA]," says Raymond Russolillo at PricewaterhouseCoopers. SEP-IRAs allow business owners to make tax-deductible contributions to employees' retirement accounts of up to 15 percent of employees' incomes. Other retirement plans include profit-sharing Keoghs and money-purchase pension plans. Russolillo recommends working with a financial planner to determine the best plan for you.

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92. Opt for a discount. If you prefer to make your own investment decisions, using a discount broker (such as TD Waterhouse, Scottrade or e-Trade) to buy and sell securities can save you 50 percent or more on stock transactions compared to full-service brokerages.

BUYING BRAINPOWER

93. Stretch your budget with barter. Swapping one product or service for another is a good way to avoid cash outlays-and unload slow-moving inventory. If you'd rather not bargain with other businesses directly, hire a commissioned barter broker (listed in the Yellow Pages under "Barter"), or join a commercial barter club or exchange. The National Association of Trade Exchanges (NATE) is a clearinghouse for member exchanges across the country, allowing business owners to swap just about anything with anyone. Participants typically receive "trade dollars" for their goods or services, which are brokered across cities nationwide with the help of NATE. Visit NATE at www.nate.org.

Read more online: www.entrepreneur.com/article/0,4621,319918,00.html

94. Time your payments. Ask suppliers if they give discounts for early payment. If not, it's to your advantage to pay your bills—including utilities, taxes and suppliers—as late as possible without incurring a fee, advises Scott. "The longer funds are under your control," he says, "the longer they're earning a return for you rather than someone else."

95. Barter for better compensation. Barter can also be an innovative way to supplement your employees' compensation. For example, you could offer your sign-making services to a barter exchange pool and, in return, receive the services of a local dentist. Then, instead of paying for dental insurance for employees, you could provide them this valuable perk-without paying any cash.

96. Join an association. Many trade and business associations have reasonable membership fees and offer discounts on everything from insurance, travel and car rental to long-distance phone service, prescriptions and even golf course fees.

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97. Seek at least three bids on everything. Even mundane purchases merit shopping around. If you quote a competitor's lower price, a supplier or vendor will often match that price to win your business.

MERCHANDISE MATTERS

98. Get reacquainted with your inventory. What with warehousing, handling and insurance, inventory carrying costs often exceed 25 percent per year, says Collins. To recoup some of those expenses, present the product in a different light: "Restaging an old product is usually less expensive than introducing a new one," says Weinrauch. "Often all that's needed is to update its image, make improvements or create a spinoff."

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99. Junk it. Get rid of unsold, damaged or returned merchandise at year-end, advises Crouch. Advertise a year-end "fire" sale and save the advertisement for IRS documentation; then whatever you don't sell, give to charity and get a receipt. "The lower your year-end inventory," says Crouch, "the higher your cost of goods sold—and the lower your reported net income and taxes."

HELPFUL HINTS

100. Go back to school . . . and introduce yourself to the head of your local college business program. Many of these programs build community work into their curriculum and can provide valuable assistance in writing or revising your business plan—or doing market research—for free. Visit Entrepreneur.com's Top Entrepreneurial Colleges listing (www.entrepreneur.com/topcolleges) to find schools in your area with entrepreneurial programs. You can also visit your local Small Business Development Center (www.sba.gov/sbdc), a partially SBA-funded national program that offers assistance and information to new and current entrepreneurs with 1,100 centers, often located on college campuses.

101. Consult Uncle Sam. Call your nearest Small Business Administration (SBA) office or Small Business Development Center (www.sba.gov/sbdc) for information on no or low-cost financing or growing a business. Also check out the SBA's Web site at www.sba.gov, which allows you to download numerous useful publications for free.

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